Native to Nowhere: Sustaining Home and Community in a Global Age

Timothy Beatley

Reviewed by Dana Archer-Rosenthal

With nearly two decades' experience writing on urban sustainability issues, Timothy Beatley has established himself as a preeminent proponent of local action as the determinant of true sustainability. Keeping with this theme, *Native to Nowhere* transforms eight years of fieldwork—and an enviable travel itinerary—into an exhaustive set of examples showing successful urban sustainability efforts from cities and towns throughout the United States, Canada and Europe.

In his ninth book, Beatley approaches the idea of sustainability through the lens of place-making. He begins with an argument that we have created a built environment modeled in the image of the world's largest corporations and sustained by the prevailing ethos of sprawl. This "march of sameness" has made America devoid of real places—"distinctive places worthy of our loyalty and commitment, places where we feel at home, places that inspire and uplift and stimulate us and that provide social and environmental sustenance." Reversing this trend, by creating places that respect and embrace local resources and communities, is a crucial step towards addressing the social, environmental and economic challenges that we face today.

While many authors might have chosen to tackle the subject of sustainable place-making using a structure based on the three E's of sustainable development (environment, economy and equity), Beatley presents ten categories of actions that play a role in transforming—and localizing—the places and ways in which we live, work, and socialize. While some of these categories cover familiar ground for planners—for example, decreased automobile dependence through design, historic preservation, adaptive reuse and local food production—others touch on areas less frequently included in the sustainable planning agenda: multigenerational communities, shared ownership of property and institutions, public art and celebrations, and creating opportunities for education in nontraditional venues.

These departures from the usual urban sustainability literature are what make this book stand out. By presenting such a range of endeavors under the umbrella of sustainability, Beatley accomplishes two important things. First, he gently provokes the reader to think about what the premise and promises of sustainable development really mean. If sustainable development is supposed to have a temporal aspect—respecting the rights of past and future generations—it should follow that making places safe and accessible for a community's youngest and oldest members should be a key issue in place-making. If sustainability is about reducing the footprint of what

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we consume, can a model of development that remains rooted in individual ownership and consumption really be considered sustainable? One example, beautiful for its simplicity, features a lending "library" for tools that operates in Takoma Park, Maryland and saves residents the money and space it takes to buy and store infrequently used items.

Second, with his broad agenda and diverse examples, Beatley begins to answer the question that seems to daunt many students of planning: How? How do we overcome the numerous obstacles that stand in the way of a sustainable world, including but not limited to social isolation, a lack of individual and political will, and a deeply ingrained culture of wasteful consumerism? Beatley himself acknowledges how daunting these obstacles can be. Furthermore, and somewhat paradoxically, his 200 pages of examples of successful initiatives are at times overwhelming for a reader trying to digest, distill and in some way act upon Beatley's message.

Yet he includes the role of education and the importance of building inclusive political coalitions as components of sustainable place-making, providing two potential answers to these hard questions. Examples of initiatives to train real estate agents to market houses in historical neighborhoods or to talk to their clients about the important ecological qualities or historical merits of their new communities were strikingly logical and creative strategies, pointing to the necessity of including an ever-wider spectrum of actors in the local sustainability project.

From Beatley's many examples, the reader realizes that the shift to sustainability is bound to be a process of fits and starts, with success built more from grassroots initiatives than from public policy—and that this incremental approach to change is not bad. America may not, as a society, be ready for a widespread shift from private to shared ownership, but many individuals might be easily convinced to borrow expensive or bulky tools instead of buying them. These small changes foster lasting habits, trends and movements, and a movement built from local efforts, slowly and inclusively, ensures its own continued success and relevance.

Two problems that stood out within the text were poor copy editing, which served to distract a reader from the points being made, and an over-reliance on certain places and examples to the exclusion of the hundreds of others that exist. Indeed, even with all the examples the book provides, any readers who keep their eyes and ears open to their surroundings or to the media could come up with additional examples of the successful place-making techniques that Beatley highlights. Perhaps this is the most encouraging element of the book. Many articles have been written about the success of Paris' bicycle-sharing program, which provides an environmentally-friendly mode of transportation for locals and tourists alike. But undoubtedly more common are the multifaceted initiatives helping to reconnect people to the places where they live and the natural and social networks that surround them—initiatives that have not yet found a publicist like Timothy Beatley.